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ABSTRACT

Information on current trends and issues in English instruction, compiled by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions, is presented in this report, the seventh annual report by the commissions. The commissions and their directors are as follows: (1) Reading Commission (Constance Weaver); (2) Commission on Literature (John Pfordresher); (3) Commission on Media (William V. Costanzo); (4) Commission on Composition (Sharon Crowley); (5) Commission on Language (Jesse Perry); and (6) Commission on Curriculum (Linda Shadiow). Some of the subjects discussed in the document include whole language, concerns about the widespread increase of legislative actions regarding teaching, narrow concepts of literacy, the literary canon, literature instruction and evaluation, the dangers of "performance goals," teacher education, teacher as researcher projects, the role and use of mass media and new technologies in the classroom, writing assessment and the politics thereof, language arts textbooks and their assumptions about teaching and learning, the use of computers in the classroom, ability grouping, and local curriculum development. (SR)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1990--SIX SUMMARIES

Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English

Compiled by Stephen Piazza and Charles Suhor, NCTE

During their meetings at the recent Annual Convention, the six NCTE Commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the ideas below do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the seventh annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

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While expressing gratification that a whole-language philosophy of learning and teaching is guiding instructional decision-making among a growing number of teachers, Commission members again expressed various related concerns: though "emergent literacy" is increasingly understood as a developmental process, in actual practice age/grade expectations are rigid and do not allow for individual differences; though teachers are increasingly using children's literature as a basis for reading development, all too often good books are debased by being "workbooked" to death; though publishers have begun to market some improved instructional materials, some publishers are using the words and reputations of leading whole language educators to promote materials that such educators themselves would never endorse; and though "whole language" is increasingly being recognized as an effective means of developing literacy and promoting learning, policy makers and administrators with insufficient understanding of the philosophy are mandating "whole language" programs with little or no teacher input and inadequate inservice, a counterproductive practice that is contrary to the philosophy they are attempting to implement.

Members of the Commission also expressed concern that though the President and the nation's governors recommended the decentralization of authority and the return of decisionmaking to the school site, educational goals and means are increasingly being dictated by legislators influenced by lobbyists representing only a select viewpoint among reading educators, with a narrow conceptualization of literacy and how the nation's alleged illiteracy problems can be solved. For example: a position paper headed "U. S. Senate Republican Policy Committee, William L. Armstrong, Chairman, September 13, 1989" (author or authors otherwise unspecified) offers statistics on the illiteracy problem in America, inaccurately equates a whole language "method" with language experience and a whole-word or "look and say" method, attributes our country's illiteracy problem to such practices, and claims that "The overwhelming evidence from research and classroom results indicates that the cure for the 'disease of illiteracy' is the restoration of the instructional practice of intensive, systematic phonics in every primary school in America!" Legislation is recommended that would require teachers receiving federal funds for their programs (such as Chapter 1) to be "required to be trained in intensive systematic phonics." The paper also suggests that the nation's Governors "evaluate reading programs in state funded teacher training education institutions, and propose legislation requiring teachers to be taught intensive systematic phonics as part of their training to teach in the public schools." As an example, the paper cites legislation recently passed in the state of Ohio.

Commission members are gravely concerned about the widespread increase of such legislative actions on the local, state, and national levels. One reason is that such legislation is being proposed and passed on the basis of lobbying efforts reflecting only a select body of severely challenged research within the profession. Another reason is that such legislation seems to reflect an increase, not a decrease, of decision-making by those far removed from the realities of teaching and learning. A third reason is that such legislation seems to reflect a severely limited and limiting concept of what constitutes "literacy."

Discussing these and other related developments, Commission members concluded that we need to intensify our efforts to encourage discussion and development of a broader concept of literacy than that reflected by test scores; to devise and make the public and policy makers aware of more appropriate ways of assessing the development of literacy.

and to influence political decision-making so as to facilitate rather than discourage the kinds of teaching that promote literacy as more broadly conceived.

Other trends discussed by Commission members focused on language-related issues One member expressed concern about growth in the number of college and university "remedial" programs designed specifically for African-American students who speak Black English, since such programs are linguisticslly unsound, reflect a "deficit" hypothesis, and--by singling out African American students from international students whose English is also "nonstandared"--both reflect and promote racism. Also noted was the fact that there are growing numbers of culturally different students of limited English proficiency in our public schools, many of whom live in smaller school districts that do not have the resources to institute special programs for individual students Thus it is recommended that teacher training institutions integrate experience dealing with children who have difficulty using English into the regular preparation of their graduates.

Constance Weaver
Director

NCTE Commission on Literature

Trends and Issues in the Teaching of Literature.

a. The "Jeffersonian Compact" which concluded the conference on education between the nation's governors and President Bush [New York Times 1 Oct 89] noted, as an "overriding objective," the need "to develop an ambitious, realistic set of performance goals that reflect the views of those with a stake in the performance of our education system." They concluded that "To succeed we need a common understanding and a common mission."

The Commission on Literature recognizes the political significance of this call for national educational goals, and considers this moment in America's educational history as critical. With the possibility of dramatic reductions in future Defense spending, along with the nation's slipping position within the arena of world economic competition, coupled with the mounting, serious problems found in the lives of young people in many of the nation's communities, it may well be that there will be a sudden, concerted effort to restructure and improve education in the United States, and the Commission members agreed that it is essential for NCTE to be proactive, not reactive within this historical context.

The call for "goals" is, however, potentially damaging. Commission members noted the dramatic improvements in the way people teach literature in some areas of the country, as, for instance, in the new California English Language Arts Framework. In such programs students learn spelling and grammar through their immersion in the study of literature, and a highly restrictive set of national performance goals might work against the most useful aspects of such a program.

Much of the best in recent thinking about the literature curriculum and about the teaching of literature has come from individual teachers, and Commission members insisted upon the importance of teacher empowerment in curriculum planning. Commission members agreed that one of the most significant examples of this is The English Coalition Conference's Democracy through Language [NCTE, 1989]. The Coalition's general suggestions for a transformation in the way we teach literature might be rendered nugatory by badly conceived national goals. An example of this kind of danger appears in the National Endowment for the Humanities' recent monograph Fifty Hours. A Core Curriculum for College Students [NEH October 1989] and its lists of required texts. Commission members agreed that it is precisely in the area between the English Coalition's generalized description of how future education in literature should proceed, and the Governors' call for a "realistic set of performance goals" that we find a specific challenge to NCTE's leadership in education.

Commission members therefore urge the formation of a second English Coalition Conference to formulate NCTE's concrete response to the call for "performance goals." They suggest:

* that it include teachers K through college in integrated sessions;

* that it invite representatives from the other subject areas such as NCTM and NCSS to be present and active throughout its deliberations;
* that it be held during the summer, to permit teachers from every level to attend;
* that it meet on a college campus where participants would have access to a library, to word processing equipment, and so on;
* that it invite major speakers, including leading members of the Governors' Conference, to address its members;
* that during its deliberations the participants take an imaginative, flexible, and independent stance towards the concept of national educational goals;
* that the conference conclude with group reports, concrete proposals which reflect the best in current theory and practice in the teaching of literature.

b. During their consideration of the call for national goals, Commission members found themselves frequently discussing the role which assessment continues to play in influencing how literature is currently taught. They noted with dismay the abuse of standardized tests, which continue, in some parts of the country, to dictate classroom practices. At the same time, they observed a growing awareness of the problem in some of the test-makers themselves, and a perception on their part that they need to explore new forms of testing. Commission members commended experiments in California, and elsewhere, which call for the examination of portfolios of student work, or which use performance sessions in which groups of students discussing works of literature are video taped, their ideas and forms of verbal expression later assessed by teams of observers. While acknowledging that such methods take more time and are more costly than machine-scored multiple choice tests, the Commission found that they indicate a more humane, holistic, and ultimately more fair way of determining student progress in the study of literature.

c. Commission members noted the continuing strength of traditional canons of literary texts in secondary and college curricula [such as the list of frequently assigned titles reported by Applebee in English Journal September 1989], and wondered aloud whether a certain canon of preferred texts is even emerging for primary schools. What are the forces which seem to keep teachers using the same texts in their classrooms year after year? Commission members were reluctant to assign responsibility to any single group. Textbook publishers and editors respond to market demand, and think that the market currently demands canonic texts. School curriculum planners and state text adoption agencies respond to calls for representative and traditional selections. Teachers on selection committees, as Shannon's research has shown, try to guess at what their administrators want them to choose, rather than thinking independently. And typical classroom teachers with too many classes to prepare and too many students to teach find it easier to return, year after year, to texts they know and feel competent

to teach, rather than trying new, unfamiliar, and culturally alien materials.

To expand and vary the list of literature texts taught to American students, to include a diversity of voices in the curriculum, Commission members concluded that further teacher training was crucial. At times this training might take the form of usable materials published by NCTE press which would help the teacher feel the competence to present texts which he or she had not studied in school; at times it might take the form of NCTE or NCTE Affiliate sponsored inservice seminars or summer programs at which teachers could themselves expand their own study of literature and could discuss with fellow teachers how to integrate new materials into their courses. The Commission urges NCTE to explore these and other ways of transforming the national literature curriculum through the most powerful force available to us: further teacher education, helping teachers to be life-long learners.

d. Related to the problem of canon expansion are problems in finding texts by minority writers suitable for the classroom; i.e. texts with content and language suitable for young readers. There is also the problem of how to read and how to think about writing which comes from a culture quite different from that of the student. One has to learn to think and react as others do, in ways which can seem quite alien. This is a considerable challenge for both student and teacher.

e. Commission members discussed forms of research which they considered to have the greatest impact on the current teaching of literature. The work of Louise Rosenblatt and her colleagues continues to serve as a highly influential model for many literature teachers. And Nancie Atwell's <u>In the Middle</u> is a significant example of whole language teaching for elementary and middle schools which is having a strong impact on innovative teachers. Reading workshops which allow students to explore classroom libraries with considerable freedom, and which rely upon response journals as a record of student reaction to what they read, were highly praised. Members also noted the impact of feminist theory generally upon the college curriculum, both in the expanding number of texts by women being taught, and in a change in the way in which texts written by men which deal with women are now considered.

Commission members agreed that we need more research into how students respond to literature which they encounter in the classroom, both their own literature and that generated by other cultural groups. As an example of the kinds of issues which need further study, they noted that African-American students seem resistant to texts from their culture at certain ages, interested in them at other times. We need to understand more clearly the nature of such reactions, what causes them, and how teachers can work constructively with student attitudes and student reactions. The NCTE, through its research activities, should encourage Teacher as Researcher projects using these issues as their focus.

John Pfordresher
Director

NCTE Commission on Media
Trends and Issues

Recent advances in technology are changing the nature of our communications media--and our lives--at a bewildering pace. New methods of storing and exchanging information by computers and other electronic means have magnified the store and complicated the exchange. Improvements in videotapes, laserdisks, camcorders, and computer software have made movies, television shows, and multi-sensory, dynamic data banks as portable as books. The growing ownership of media by families means that more students have the power to enjoy, analyze, and create more media texts. Distance learning projects have forged new links among schools, widening the windows of access and diversity. The computer is emerging as a central organizing instrument for integrating the varieties of media--video, sound recordings, laser disks, graphics, texts--providing more control to those who have the knowledge and the wherewithal. These trends have blurred the boundaries between one medium and another, compelling us to reexamine our definitions of literacy and basic education.

While the Commission sees much of value in this progress, it notes some disturbing tendencies. Among these is a problematic relationship between educators and the media industries. Teachers are uncertain about the copyright laws concerning video, software, scanners, and the like. Those who produce non-print educational materials often do so without consulting parents and teachers. In some cases, like the controversial Channel One initiative, there is serious concern that students are being used as captive audiences for superficial "factoids" and commercial messages. Commission members also voiced concern that students who have traditionally been excluded from the mainstream of printed knowledge are being denied access to new forms of information. Meanwhile, doubts about the effectiveness of technology are being raised increasingly by leaders in the field.

The Commission sees these developments as central to the issues being raised in our profession. Critical thinking in today's world necessarily involves critical viewing. Cultural diversity must include the diverse media through which different cultural assumptions are represented and learned. A theory of multiple intelligences should acknowledge the role of media that exercise the eye and ear through multiple symbol systems. And a pedagogy that embraces a whole language concept should not exclude the languages of film and television which shape so much of our students' linguistic lives. It is time we recognize that reading, writing, listening, and speaking are part of a continuum that encompasses many media.

Media Commission Trends and Issues

After meeting with representatives from Britain, Canada, and Australia, the Commission noted significant gaps between their assumptions about media and current views in the U.S. In this country, we tend to think that film and television are simple and knowable, that viewers are basically passive recipients of information (or misinformation), that movies and TV are strong corruptive agents. In the commonwealth nations, these media are regarded as complex, multivocal texts. The act of reading these texts is considered a highly interpretive, open-ended activity: a negotiation between producers and the audience. That may be why the study of media in those countries has been integrated into all levels of education.

In view of these developments, the Commission urges the profession to give more attention to the whole language environment of our students, helping them refine, shape, and extend what they have learned through, from, and about all forms of media. The Commission recommends a more cooperative relationship between the media industries and the educational community. It calls for closer study of international models of media education and wider dissemination of sound theory, reliable research, and successful practice. It further underscores the need for including media education in all programs of teacher preparation and professional development. Toward these ends, the Commission advocates the launching of a National Media Project to help bring all media and the English language arts into their proper relation in our schools.

William V. Costanzo, Director,
NCTE Commission on Media

Commission on Composition
Trends and Issues

Commission members revisited the issue of writing assessment for the third year in a row. While members accept the necessity of assessment, they warn against external imposition of assessment instruments on teachers and students. They further express concern about widespread use of measures of writing assessment which are not generated by teachers and which are based on theories of learning that are clearly outmoded. Such tests include standardized measurements which use so-called "objective" questions to measure writing ability. Commission members point out that many methods of assessment are available, such as portfolio assessment.

Increasingly, not only students, but parents and teachers as well, are judged by the outcome of assessment. It is important that tests of writing ability be devised and administered by persons who know the needs of local communities. It is also important to protect the rights of the assessed: students, parents, and teachers. Commission members express concern that assessment measures are often imposed on students against their will, and that these measures can be used to exclude non-mainstream students from access to higher levels of education. It is vitally important that assessment be designed and administered with the needs of the learner in mind. The results of assessment must be moved closer to learners, as well. For example, the outcome of writing assessment might be noted on report cards.

In a related discussion, Commission members deplored the continuing exclusion of teachers from decision-making about such matters as assessment techniques and curriculum development. They further remark on teachers' and students' lack of access in many schools to the equipment needed for writing instruction: paper, pens, pencils, books. They also comment on the continuing problems faced by teachers of writing: unconscionable workloads, low pay, lack of job security.

The Commission notes and applauds the trend toward teacher-as-writer. Members encourage teachers of writing to write and to publish writing about what takes place in their classrooms. Writing needs to be seen as a component of the writing teacher's duties, not as something undertaken above or beyond it. They suggest that districts and schools sponsor writing sessions for teachers. Teachers should be encouraged to inform parents about their childrens' writing performance, and commission members approve of the movement toward better home-school connections.

The Commission applauds the increasing use of computers in the writing classroom. Members note that computers change the social relations of the classroom, focussing discussion and work on texts generated by students. Further, the use of word-processing eases revision and editing, thus reducing student anxiety and making

writing more inviting. As with all technologies, however, computers can be misused. Commission members warn that computers cannot replace student interaction with a teacher; nor should computers be used to drill students in minor points of grammar.

Commission members also discussed the relation of research in composition to the teaching of writing. They suggest that the interest in theory may be counter-productive if it replaces self-reflective practice. The commission encourages writing teachers to engage in research that grows out of their practice, and members further encourage schools to help teachers in their efforts to secure grants to support such research.

Sharon Crowley
Director

COMMISSION ON LANGUAGE
Trends and Issues Summary

The Commission on Language continues to be interested in language arts textbooks especially at the K-6 grade levels. Unfortunately, even the newest editions of these textbooks do not incorporate the best current knowledge about language and its operation, nor are they structured to encourage teachers' best instructional practices. Instead, the majority of these texts continue to: 1) artificially separate the strands of the language arts; 2) disproportionately stress formal grammatical terminology and prescriptive usage over descriptive information about the language; 3) present drills and exercises that have no transfer to real language use in reading, writing, or speaking.

Such books not only misrepresent the true, complex, and fascinating nature of language, but they also steal time from more valuable class activities -- such as reading, writing, and talking about language. Because language arts textbooks are such a powerful, traditional, but unexamined element in the experience of American school children, the Commission feels that a thorough examination of their use and effectiveness is now in order. Textbooks should be carefully examined to be certain that they begin to: 1) integrate the strands of the language arts; 2) emphasize descriptive information about the language rather than formal grammatical terminology and prescriptive usage; 3) present only those drills and exercises that have transfer to real language use in reading, writing, or speaking.

The Commission continues to express concern about the quality of undergraduate teacher education. In revising teacher education programs in English, the Commission believes the needs of English teachers above and beyond those of standard English majors should be considered. What serves as the traditional major on most campuses today emphasizes literature, giving some lip service to theory, and pays little attention to other aspects of verbal communication.

The Commission is still concerned with language and how it is learned. The Council has been sensitive to the importance of situational appropriateness in describing language patterns. The Commission applauds a trend to increasingly detail descriptions of language variation depending upon the audience and the situation. Language programs which deny differences and do not build on a respect for and understanding of the different linguistic backgrounds and strengths that learners bring to the school contribute to the dropout rate for students who have been declared "at risk."

Some American states adopt school textbooks on a statewide basis, a practice which causes problems for teachers and students throughout the nation. In the adoption states, classroom teachers and local school districts are deprived of the full range of alternatives which they have the professional right to consider as they seek out the best instructional materials for their own students. Outside of the adoption states, teachers and districts often find that the materials available for their review have been expressly to meet the idiosyncratic demands and criteria of large adoption states. Sometimes adoption states have promulgated criteria for textbooks so narrow and rigid as to be construed by many educators as distortion or even censorship. One possible remedy for this situation is for adoption states to heed the imperatives of school reform and teacher empowerment and return to a more decentralized and democratic process of textbook selection.

Trends and Issues Summary

Many American schools continue to divide students by measures of ability or achievement and assign them to homogeneous, leveled groups for instruction, while such tracking may be an educationally sound practice in certain rare circumstances, it presents many grave problems which usually outweigh its benefits. Such practice also denies students opportunities to experience a variety of language styles, both formal and informal.

The Commission continues to be concerned about the appropriate use of computers in the English language arts. They offer a wide range of both constructive possibilities and significant dangers. On the positive side, computers can become part of classroom activities which genuinely enhance students' experience of language and ideas. Word processing, databases, networking, bulletin boards, simulations, interactive fiction, LOGO, and electronic mail are among the computer uses which, in the hands of thoughtful teachers, can become part of rich, imaginative instruction in English.

The Commission recommends that careful examination of textbooks be conducted in order to differentiate between true and mislabled whole language materials The deception is only exacerbated by the mandating or wholesale adoption of "whole language programs" by administrators or school boards at the local, state or provincial levels. The results of such mandates are the trappings of whole language without the understanding of language learning necessary for whole language teachers.

The Commission also strongly recommends that teachers be allowed time for professional growth and the authority to make curricular decisions for their classrooms.

Finally, the Commission is still concerned with the English Only movement and has sponsored two programs at annual meetings of NCTE that have focused on this insidious movement and its ramifications for teaching and learning language. A Commission publication entitled "Not Only English: Affirming America's Multilingual Heritage" will be published by NCTE in the spring.

Jesse Perry
Director
Commission on Language

TRENDS AND ISSUES STATEMENT

Commission on Curriculum

National Council of Teachers of English

Background Statement:

At the start of the new decade, the Curriculum Commission noted that *curriculum is a public issue*. Businesses are starting their own pre-schools with plans for elementary schools, participants in national and state-wide summits discuss more than the test scores that have been target topics in recent years, and popular and professional press are asking questions and advancing answers about what is being taught, how it is being taught, how well it is being learned and what "should" be added.

The tensions that are evident as various groups propose answers to questions of English/language arts curriculum today mirror those that have been a part of the discussions of the Commission on Curriculum since it was founded in 1945. The first commission director, Dora V. Smith characterized the "ever-present criticism of the teaching of English" and noted that such criticism was being voiced "now because it is too traditional . . . and too intent on narrow skills, and again, because it attends too little to the three R's and too much to fads and fancies." Two decades later in 1965 the commission again noted "the confusion" about the English curriculum "arising out of a massive movement to reshape American education" and highlighted the need for English teachers to have "opportunities to clarify their present sense of purpose, review their convictions about what they believe most needs to be learned, and to examine with care the relevence of the content they are choosing or will be urged to choose." And a little more than a decade later, in 1977, when the commission was given a charge by the National Council of Teachers of English to write "national guidelines for curricula in English," the commission responded with a report that identified some of "the best of what is happening" rather than "what ought to happen."

Today, 45 years after the establishment of NCTE's Commission on Curriculum, commissioners still agree that curriculum is a public issue, and believe that while tensions about what is being taught and what should be taught in English/language arts may be more visible (and the proponents and opponents of the different sides may be more vocal), the visions for curricular excellence in the next decade arise from the best of what is in practice now. It is the process through which such effective curricular practices have been arrived that holds the key to excellence; the "best" is responsive to local needs, goals, and characteristics and is less likely to result from the imposition of an externally developed template imposed on a system no matter what its shape.

Visions for the 1990s:

The vision the commissioners have for the upcoming decade is that the various "publics" who are now discussing and seeking to influence curriculum in English/language arts will recognize that *curriculum is a dynamic process not a static one*, that *curriculum developed for and responsive to the characteristics of the local context can have the greatest positive impact on learning*. In its annual review of trends and issues in English/language arts curriculum, commissioners organized their visions for the 90s around the major curriculum components researcher Ralph Tyler identified (*Basic Principles of Curriculum Instruction*, 1950).

FORMLATION (identification and selection of purposes) - The Commission on English Curriculum sees these current "best practices" as models for formulation of curriculum in the coming decade:

Anchoring the curriculum primarily in what we know about students and secondarily in what we know about "things"; building curriculum with knowledge gained from the teacher-researcher movement where teachers actually engage in "primary" research beyond enhancing and clarifing the research of others; using university-school collaboration to explore curriculuar options, and alternatives; recognizing the value of adaptation rather than adoption of curriculum formulated elsewhere; involving teachers and students in curriculum development work so more first-hand knowledge is used in decision-making; strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration so curriculum formulation draws from the insights from teachers at different grade levels and in different disciplines.

CONTEXTS (identification and selection of experiences leading to the attainment of goals) - The Commission on English Curriculum sees these current "best practices" as models for identifying and selecting learning experiences in the coming decade:

Acknowledging that this aspect of curriculum evolves from what we know of/learn about students within each school; creating experiences through which students "learn" by teaching themselves; involving parents, business people and community members in the process of schooling; using the knowledge gained from writing process work to rethink the teaching and learning experiences in other curricular areas; understanding and benefitting from pluralistic settings; developing experiences which call for ongoing assessment and re-evaluation of one's application of knowledge; providing experiences which take into consideration a variety of learning styles.

OPERATION (organization of experiences leading to the attainment of the goals) - The Commission on English Curriculum sees these current "best practices" as models for the organization of learning experiences in the coming decade:

Planning for increasing student interaction with others from different age groups and backgrounds; using technology to extend , explore, and augment the activities; including more room for "thinking" beyond rote learning and recitiation; including a variety of learning group models; lessening the dependence on textbook provided sequences; encouraging and recognizing the necessity of teachers-as-learners.

EVALUATION (assessment of the impact and influence of teaching and learning) - The Commission on English Curriculum sees these current "best practices" as models for evaluation of curriculum in the coming decade:

Recognizing the limitations of standardized testing; exploring and using alternate means of assessment both "during" and "after" learning; weaving knowledge gained from all types of assessments into the curriculum development process; using teacher-formulated questions as the basis for some research investigations; actively involving students in the assessment of their own learning; communicating with parents and communities about the different ypes of assessments and the meanings of these.

Submitted by
Linda Shadiow, Director